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ABSTRACT

Future teachers were surveyed on their perceptions of the impact of their teacher preparation program upon their success in student teaching. Forty-one undergraduate elementary education majors were surveyed before and after the student teaching experience. Preliminary results suggest that prior to student teaching, these prospective teachers perceived themselves as having strong abilities to teach. Following student teaching these individuals: (1) continued to view themselves as capable teachers, especially when teaching whole classes and large groups; (2) exhibited less confidence when using nontraditional approaches to teaching, particularly cooperative learning, individualized instruction, and integrated approaches to reading and writing; (3) valued methods coursework and practicum experiences as the greatest contributors to an understanding of how to teach; and (4) began to comprehend the relevancy of general education to successful teaching. These results are discussed in relation to recent recommendations for reform in teacher education. A bibliography, five tables, and a copy of the student questionnaire are appended. (Author/LL)

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Prospective Teachers' Perceptions About Their Teacher Preparation and Success in Teaching: A Preliminary Analysis

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PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THEIR TEACHER PREPARATION AND SUCCESS IN TEACHING: A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

How do prospective teachers perceive the worth of their teacher preparation program upon their ability to successfully student teach? Forty-one undergraduate elementary education majors in a women's college were surveyed prior to student teaching to discover how they perceive the relative influences of their general education, academic major, methods and field experiences on their learning to teach. After student teaching the students responded to the same survey items so that we might discern changes, if any, in their beliefs and perceptions about teaching and their teacher preparation.

Preliminary results of the study indicate the following: (1) Prior to actually student teaching, prospective teachers perceive themselves quite strong in their ability to teach; (2) After student teaching, the prospective teachers still view themselves as capable teachers, especially when teaching whole classes and large groups; (3) After student teaching, the prospective teachers feel less confident about using non-traditional approaches to teaching, particularly cooperative learning, individualized instruction and integrated approaches to reading and writing; (4) After student teaching, these student teachers viewed both their methods coursework and practica experiences as contributing greatly in their understanding of how to teach. (5) Final data also suggest that prospective teachers begin to see the relevancy of their general education for successful teaching after they have actually student taught. These results are discussed in relation to recent recommendations for reform in teacher education.

Educational reform has been very much in the forefront during the 1980s. Much of the criticism of the educational process has centered around the quality of programs, or lack thereof, which prepare persons to enter the field of education in the role of teacher. From these concerns have emerged a clear need for teachers to be intellectually strong (Goodlad, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c) and reflective thinkers (Sedlak, 1987). These arguments call for a strengthening of the arts and sciences so that teachers are truly liberally educated (Carnegie Commission, 1986; The Holmes Group, 1986). Various other reform ideas have emphasized the importance of encouraging more minority students to enter teaching and improving the non-minority teachers' understandings of the life experiences of people of other colors, classes and languages (Hodge, 1990; Ogbu, 1990). Additional changes, such as forming university-school partnerships for training new teachers (Goodlad, 1990c), collaborating with classroom teachers, university professors and student teachers (Cochran-Smith,1990, 1991),integrating morality and ethics in teacher preparation (Goodlad, 1990d), developing reflective teachers (Zeichner & Liston, 1987) and learning specific pedagogy (Shulman, 1987), are important recommendations to improve the preparation of new teachers.

Clearly there is no shortage of ideas to improve teacher education. However, there exists enormous financial, social and professional resistance to change. Without national leadership for allocating the necessary resources, reforms that do take place are likely to be piecemeal and the result of local, and less frequently statewide, efforts rather than national leadership in these areas.

A major purpose of this study is to describe reforms in teacher preparation at an independent liberal arts college for women and to examine how prospective teachers perceive the relative influence of the various aspects of the revised teacher education program on the their ability to successfully student teach. Related research on student teachers perceptions about their teacher preparation found that students believed their field experiences and student teaching had the greatest impact on their ability to teach (Goodlad, 1990c; Richardson-Koehler, 1988); in these studies prospective teachers questioned the usefulness or connectedness of their practica and methods coursework.

In our study we also examined prospective teachers' perceptions about their teacher preparation. Because students in our program participate in field experiences which are closely integrated with their professional coursework, we anticipated that they may well value their educational coursework more than students in the Goodlad and Richardson-Koehler studies. We suspected that an integration of theory and practice would produce teachers who are more confident and positive about their overall professional preparation, including their educational coursework. We were especially interested in answering the following three questions:

(1) Given extensive reforms in our undergraduate elementary education program, particularly in its integration of professional coursework with extensive field experiences, how did prospective teacher perceive the applicability of their teacher preparation?

(2) Did prospective teachers change in their perceptions about the usefulness of their teacher preparation after they have student taught?

(3) Were there any relationships in the perceptions of student teachers and their cooperating teachers about the teacher preparation program and the curricula and pedagogy used in their classrooms?

The impetus for this paper derived from the practical concern of the impact of changes on undergraduate students' perceptions of preparation for teaching both in terms of their liberal arts course work as well as their professional coursework in education. We were also interested in examining how cooperating teachers perceived our students and in their notions of what is important in preparing preservice teachers.

METHOD

Description of Education Program

This study was conducted at a small liberal arts college for women in New York state. Every education major also majored in a liberal arts area. In terms of professional credits, prospective elementary education teachers completed 29 credits in educational coursework, excluding 14 credits for student teaching and seminar which were completed simultaneously in fall of the senior year (See Appendix 1 for a typical program outline). They also completed at least 33 credits in their chosen liberal arts field; this coursework was spread rather evenly across their college years. Concomitantly, every student at Russell Sage fulfilled a series of general education requirements which were developed to broaden and deepen students' views of the world and learning in areas such as the arts and sciences. These college requirements and programmatic demands appeared to combine to prepare prospective teachers who are broadly educated and intellectually capable. Whether or not prospective teachers saw the connections between their liberal arts and professional studies remained to be seen.

Four years ago we revised our program to include increasingly broadened practica experience across all education courses. We envisioned students observing and participating in a variety of situations wherein their responsibilities increased as they became more knowledgeable about the field of education and more comfortable in their role as prospective teachers. Thus with every education course, excluding EDU309--Reading and Language Arts Methods

where students view videos of actual classes with cooperating teachers and student teachers working with various sized groups in literacy development, students were required to spend time in practica situations in schools or other programs involving children (e.g., after school programs, daycare programs). In the first three education courses students observed and participated at least 80 hours in unsupervised practica. In January of the Junior year, students were placed in a supervised setting where they completed at least 125 hours participating and teaching small groups of students with emphasis on the language arts. During the spring semester, these prospective teachers spent every Thursday and Friday in the same school at a different level (e.g., if the January placement was in an intermediate grade, the next placement was in a primary grade); again, students spent at least 125 hours with increased responsibility for instructional programming for larger groups of children. These supervised practica were closely tied to methods course work wherein students applied content they have been learning. Simply stated, there was a direct attempt to link theory with practice. Prior to student teaching itself, every prospective teacher had completed at least 80 hours of unsupervised practica and at least 250 hours of supervised practica. Additionally, conscious decisions were made to place students in a variety of situations in an effort to ensure that they had experienced self contained, combination and/or team teaching situations in a variety of settings (urban, rural and suburban; public and private) with differing views on educational practice (e.g., basal versus literature program). Teachers who served as role models in the Junior year also assumed the role of cooperating teacher in the senior year to other preservice teachers. Thus, teachers had a long term, established relationship with the college supervisors as well as the program. It was hoped that such open relationships and continued commitment would enable college students to grow as reflective teachers as well as connect theory and practice which too frequently are left to chance (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985).

Subjects

Forty one undergraduate student teachers voluntarily participated in the present study. All of the subjects attended a liberal arts women's college where they majored in education and one other academic discipline, usually psychology. Additionally, their cooperating teachers participated in this study.

Instruments

A 31 item questionnaire requiring students to rank their responses on a Likert-like scale ranging from 1 to 7 was developed. The first group of questions, items 1 to 10, elicited the student teachers' beliefs about their ability to teach the elementary education subject areas. The second

group of questions, items 11-24, elicited their perceptions about their ability to use different teaching skills and strategies, such as planning, management, grouping and adapting instruction. The last cluster of questions, items 25-31, elicited their opinions about the impact of their college coursework in learning to become a teacher, particularly their general education courses, academic major and especially their teacher preparation and practica. Additionally, ten open-ended questions were posed in an attempt to tease out area of strengths, concerns and connectedness that the forced choice questions might have obscured (e.g. "I feel most confident when teaching...; "My greatest concerns about student teaching are..."). These open ended questions were designed to elicit the students' knowledge, skills and attitudes toward teaching, children, and the subject area.

The student teachers' questionnaire was first piloted during the preceding spring semester. As a result of this trial run, many of the items were revised and the open-ended stems were added. We also increased the ranking scale from 1-5 to 1-7 in an effort to identify differences more clearly in the students' perceptions before and after student teaching.

The questionnaire completed by cooperating teachers included all but the last set of questions relating to specific college coursework and training (i.e., 25-31). Additionally, this questionnaire contained three question items pertaining to their sense of their student teacher's general preparation to teach as well as how the teacher preparation program might be improved.

Procedure

In the fall of their senior year, and after completing required professional coursework and practica, forty-one (N=41) undergraduate elementary education majors completed a survey form containing both Likert type questions pertaining to their undergraduate studies in general education, academic major, coursework in foundations of education, educational psychology, methods and practica experiences as well as open ended questions. This form was administered pre and post student teaching. During the last two weeks of student teaching, cooperating teachers were asked to complete a similar survey to reveal their perceptions about what is important in teacher preparation as well as their student teacher's general preparedness.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

We analyzed the numerical data in several ways. First, simple descriptive statistics of mean, standard deviations and frequency ratings for each of the numerical items were completed. We then computed correlations among items within the three categories of general ability to teach the elementary subjects (items 1-10), ability to use specific teaching skills (items 11-24) and the perceived influence of their college education upon their ability to teach (items 25-31).

Qualitative data were also analyzed and some has been included in this preliminary report. All written responses were first typed onto a master form where they could be compared and analyzed.

Analysis of Data Prior to Student Teaching

Analyzing data obtained from a Likert-type scale must be done with an eye to avoiding overstating non-parametric comparisons. Nevertheless, association of certain variables in a correlation matrix can provide possible insights as can be seen on Table 1. Initial correlations between variables that were above .60 are as follows:

Insert Table 1 about here

There were no negative correlations, but the smallest correlations have an interesting and somewhat disturbing note. The smallest correlations were between the value of practica experiences to student teachers and both the value of their academic majors and their liberal arts classes. In other words, students saw very little application of college class work to elementary school children.

In the frequency rankings, many more respondents rated their capabilities in each aspect at 4 or better. Few (characteristically two to four subjects) ranked themselves at less than 4. At the beginning of September prior to meeting their classes, they were, therefore, quite confident. However, the qualitative material gathered after the first day in their student teaching placement indicated a somewhat different picture. Approximately one-third of the respondents wrote about concerns regarding classroom management to an open ended question asking for their concerns. An equal proportion expressed worries about planning and presenting lessons well, and tieing lessons together in an integrated way. More than half the group said they were most confident about teaching reading and writing, the areas in which they have had the most course work. Finally, when asked to list their five favorite books for children, a striking pattern emerged. These students have compiled book files of hundreds of children's books they have

read. Overwhelmingly, the students cited children's books that were read to them by professors.

Analysis of Data After Student Teaching

Results of our analyses of the closed item responses from the second questionnaire revealed four patterns in the student teachers' beliefs and perceptions about teaching and their preparation for teaching. These patterns are presented as follows:

--Items suggesting an increase in student teachers perceptions and beliefs (Table 2)

--Items indicating a decrease in perceptions and beliefs about teaching (Table 3)

--Items suggesting no meaningful change from their first responses to their last responses (Table 4)

--Beliefs and perceptions that emerged after student teaching (table 5)

Table 2 presents strengthen correlations; that is, correlations which appeared even stronger after completion of their first seven-week student teaching experience.

Insert Table 2 here

These data would seem to suggest that student teachers feel more confident in teaching an integrated reading and writing, in their ability to plan instruction and manage the classroom, in their ability to teach whole classes and plan, and in teaching in a process/literature classroom and teaching large groups. Since many of these are related to classroom management concerns, it would appear to suggest that with experience many students felt they could, in fact, handle the demands of planning and implementation. However, when the decreased correlations from pre to post student teaching are examined, there is a lessening in their perceptions of their classroom management ability and their general preparation to teach.

Clearly, cooperative learning is less positively correlated with most other items; again this is very apt

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Insert Table 3 here
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to be related to their perceived difficulties in classroom management. Correlations which remained relatively unchanged are presented in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 here

Emergent correlations are those relationships which appeared after seven weeks of student teaching; these are presented in Table 5. Perhaps the most striking change is

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Insert Table 5 here
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in their perception of the relationship between ability to teach social studies and their knowledge of the world. Again, management was seen as related to ability to teach the whole class and large groups. These data seem to suggest that those who feel confident about their classroom management are likely to feel they can manage the whole class and teach large groups. It would also appear that student teachers begin to perceive a relationship between teaching whole class and planning for different learning styles and teaching large groups and adapting instruction. Perhaps because they have survived handling of the entire class, student teachers have begun to see individuals rather than a whole class. Thus, with confidence and experience they have become more sensitive to the diversity of needs among their students and perceive themselves better able to adapt.

Qualitative date from the post-student teaching clearly reveal that students continue to have concerns regarding classroom management. Nine persons indicated that their greatest concern prior to entering their second placement was regarding classroom management. Further, student teachers indicated that management problems were at the root of their most discouraging experience in student teaching (N=11), followed by differences in models/practices espoused by their cooperating teachers (N=5) or disappointment in their own competence (N=4).

DISCUSSION

After the first day of student teaching, most often spent in meetings without children present, most of these preservice teachers felt very positive about their abilities and expected to achieve success. These findings are consistent with others who have indicated students often have rosy, unrealistic views of themselves and their abilities before they actually teach (Housego, 1990; Weinstein, 1988).

At first glance the authors thought the results showed much more about us than about our novice teachers. At second glance, we saw that the respondents were anchored in time, before student teaching, and that they needed much more than their 80 hours of unsupervised practica and 250 hours of supervised practica to assess their own capabilities. Overall, students felt they were quite comfortable with teaching most subjects to most types and ages of students. Clearly in the correlational results, the most positive is also the most obvious. That is, teachers who are confident in their overall ability are confident in other specific areas as well. We expected that some of these students would feel differently after the student teaching period. We perceived form the qualitative data that most of the students were thoughtful and appeared to be the kind of teachers we intended to develop. Of course, the students who did not appear to be so made us worry and wonder. Some still wrote about using ability grouping and round robin classroom responding, despite nearly constant teaching about other teaching strategies.

And there are other indications. The almost negative correlation that students felt between their college preparation in subject matter and practical experience is something that the Faculty should address and work on. Faculty should develop ways, early in college, to help students make connections. Certainly too, students should be helped to see the wider values of a liberal arts education. We need to teach the importance of being well-educated and of learning as much as one can, always.

It was not unexpected that students should feel somewhat less confident with respect to classroom management. After some time in the classroom with real world challenges of working with large and small groups, it is common for students to express less comfort with their ability to manage students (Weinstein, 1988). The apparent decrease in use of cooperative learning with management concerns would seem to reflect the tendency for student teachers to become more controlling over the student teaching period while at the same time feeling they are less confident that school can solve the multitude of problems that various students present (Griffin, 1989; Hoy & Wolfolk, 1990; Veenman, 1984).

While classroom teachers and student teachers have been criticized for their generally poor ability to be reflective (Calderhead, 1989; Cochran-Smith, 1991), we found these respondents to be very candid about their success, failures

and worries. It was refreshing to read comments like "...a child's learning journal reflected my poor teaching" or "I didn't know the material well enough". Such comments seem to suggest that students can be taught to critically examine their short comings. The challenge remains in getting student teachers to act on their insights and to further evaluate "who" they are in the classroom and "who" they might become.

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Table I
Initial Correlations

.80 - .89

+	ability to teach large groups and ability to teach whole classes	.84
*	ability to adapt instruction and plan for different learning styles	.83
-	influence of supervised and unsupervised practica	.80
-	abiilty to teach in an integrated reading/writing program and the ability to teach writing	.80
-	general ability to function in a classroom and general preparation to teach	.80

Table I (continued)
Initial Correlations

	.70 - .79
• plan for differences in learning styles and ability to individualize	.77
- ability to manage class and general preparation to teach	.76
• general ability to function and and ability to teach whole classes	.75
• general ability to function in a classroom and plan instruction	.75
• ability to teach large and small groups	.74
• ability to adapt instruction and ability to individualize	.74
- general ability to function in a classroom and ability to use cooperative learning	.73
- general ability to function in a classroom and general preparation to teach	.73
• general ability to function and ability to teach large groups	.71
• general ability to function and ability to manage	.71
• ability to teach large groups and plan instruction	.70

Table I (continued)
Initial Correlations

.60 - .69

-	ability to individualize instruction and professional responsibilities	.64
-	ability to teach in a process/literature based classroom and teach small groups	.63
-	ability to plan for different learning styles and understanding of professional responsibilities	.62
+	influence of foundations of education and general education coursework	.62
-	ability to individualize and teach small groups	.61
+	ability to teach in a process/literature based classroom and teach large groups	.61
-	ability to use cooperative learning and general preparation to teach	.60
+	ability to plan instruction and teach whole classes	.60
*	general ability to function and teach in a process/lit classroom	.60

Table 2
Strengthened Correlations

	Before	After
teach in an integrated reading/writing and writing	.80	.86
plan for instruction and manage the class	.60	.67
teach whole classes and ability to plan	.66	.73
teach large groups and teach whole classes	.84	.93
plan for different learning styles and individualize	.77	.83
Foundations of Education and general education	.62	.77
Teach in a process/literature classroom and teach large groups	.61	.76

Table 3
Decreased Correlations

	Decrease of .20 or more
manage a classroom and general preparation to teach	.76 to .53
use cooperative learning and teach in process/lit classroom	.67 to .32
general ability to function and use cooperative learning	.73 to .34
	Decrease of .10 to .20
teach integrated reg/wtg and ability to teach reading	.69 to .52
use cooperative learning and general prep to teach	.60 to .47
general ability to function and prep to teach	.80 to .63
teach process/literature and teach small groups	.63 to .45
individualize instruction and teach small groups	.61 to .42
individualize instruction and understand professional resposibilities	.64 to . 45

Table 3 (continued)
Decreased Correlations

Decrease of .05 - .10			
plan instruction and general preparation to teach	.73	to	.63
use cooperative learning and teach whole classes	.65	to	.53
use cooperative learning and teach small groups	.66	to	.58
general ability to function in a classroom and ability to teach in a conventional classroom	.69	to	.61
plan for different learning styles and understanding of professional responsibilities	.62	to	.56
unsupervised and supervised practica	.80	to	.71

Table 4
No Meaningful Changes

	before	after
Teach large groups and general preparation to teach	.69	.67
general ability to teach and ability to manage classrooms	.71	.67
abiity to teach large groups and ability to plan instruction	.70	.67
general ability to function and ability to plan instruction	.75	.71
teach conventional classroom and teach whole classes	.67	.71
teach conventional classroom and large groups	.67	.64
teach large groups and small groups	.74	.71
general ability to function and teach large groups	.71	.69
general ability to function and teach in process/literature classroom	.60	.58
adapt instruction and individualize	.74	.78
adapt instruction and plan for different learning styles	.83	.85

Table 5
Emergent Correlations

	Before		After
Ability to teach social studies and knowledge of the world	.25	to	.72
Ability to teach health and ability to teach writing	.16	to	.61
ability to teach whole class and ability to manage class	.59	to	.83
plan for different learning styles and plan instruction	.54	to	.68
teach large groups and manage classroom	.54	to	.70
ability to use cooperative learning and teach conventional class	.55	to	.75
teach small groups and whole whole class	.57	to	.67
plan for different learning styles and teach whole class	.48	to	.65
ability to adapt instruction and teach large groups	.56	to	.63

STUDENT TEACHING QUESTIONNAIRE

We are currently examining our teacher education program and are interested in learning what you think about your courses and training at Russell Sage. Would you kindly help us by answering this questionnaire?

All the information provided on the questionnaire will be kept anonymous. We only ask for an identification code so we can match your responses on today's questionnaire with those you provide after student teaching. For this reason we ask you to provide the last four digits of your Social Security Number and the last four of your phone number.

Final four SS + phone number digits:_____

WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP!

I am an undergraduate student ____

a graduate student ____

My other major is _____

My current placement is ____ primary K-3

____ intermediate 4-6

My current placement is (check one)

____ conventional basal and textbook based

____ modified basal and textbook based

____ whole language/literature based

Please rate each of the items on the questionnaire according to a one to seven scale, with one being the lowest and seven the highest rating. (1 = have no confidence; 7 = highly confident)

I. How do you feel about your ability to teach

1.	your major subject ?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2.	world in general?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3.	reading ?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4.	writing & the language arts?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5.	integrated reading/writing?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6.	social studies ?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7.	mathematics ?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8.	science ?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9.	health ?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10.	art ?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

II. Please rate the items that follow according to how you perceive your (1 = low 7 = high)

11	general preparation to teach	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12.	ability to manage classrooms	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13.	ability to plan instruction	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14.	ability to teach whole classes	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15.	ability to teach small groups (N = 2-5)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16.	ability to teach large groups (N = 6-15)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17.	ability to teach in a conventional classroom	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18.	ability to teach in a process/literature based classroom	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
19.	ability to use cooperative learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20.	general ability to function in a classroom	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
21.	understanding of professional responsibilities		2	3	4	5	6	7
22.	ability to individualize instruction	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
23.	ability to plan for different learning styles	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
24.	ability to adapt instruction according children's cognitive/emotional development	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

III. How do you feel about the influences of the various components of your education and training at this college for becoming a teacher

0 = no opportunity 1= no impact 4= moderate impact 7=great impact

25.	coursework in academic major	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
26.	Courses in general education	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
27.	foundations of ed/ school organization	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
28.	Educational psychology /instructional design	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
29.	methods courses	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
30.	supervised practica	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
31	unsupervised practica	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

IV. Please identify or provide short answers to the following items:

32. My greatest concerns about student teaching are:

33. I feel most confident when teaching

34. I would like more training in the following area(s):

35. The part(s) of my teacher preparation which most helped me learn to become a classroom teacher are:

36. The five best children's books I have read are (why?):

V. Please write the teaching strategy which first comes to mind about the following:

37. How would you begin to teach geography in third grade?

38. What do you what students to remember about any major war in U.S. history?

39. As a generalization, what do you most want children to learn?

40. Given a typical classroom of 25 children, how will you organize/group the children for literacy instruction?

VI. Having nearly completed your studies at this college, what, if anything, would you change about your teacher education program ?